The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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THE NEED FOR A FRESH APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

DEAR MEMBER,

The issues with which this week's Supplement deals are of such far-reaching consequence that no apology is needed for confining the present letter to this one subject. For the final form of the paper I alone am responsible, but the statement was submitted in successive drafts to a considerable number of persons of wide experience and high authority in the field of education, and owes much to their advice and criticism. It has been necessary to keep strictly to the question of the right *approach* to Christian education. The discussion raises many questions to which no answer is given. But the answers to these can be gradually worked out if we have the right orientation.

A recent occurrence will help to make clear what is said in the Supplement about a true natural order. The full text of one of the sermons of the Bishop of Münster is now available. After describing the action of the Gestapo in expelling from Westphalia at a day's notice a body of priests, brothers and nuns, and in arresting and banishing without trial two Canons of the Cathedral, the Bishop declares :

"The right to life, to inviolability, to liberty, is an indispensable part of all moral order in the community. . . . Justice is the foundation of states. Great is our regret, great our concern, at seeing how this foundation is giving way to-day ; how justice, that natural and Christian virtue, indispensable to the good order of every human community, is not preserved and kept aloft, visible and recognisable by all. It is not merely because of the rights of the Church, or because of the rights of the human personality, but also for our love of our people and with the most intimate concern for our country that we beg, that we demand, that we cry out: 'Justice.' "

The attack is on the denial of a natural virtue, the common heritage of pagan and Christians. But the voice that rang through Germany in protest was the voice of a Christian Bishop. It was the Christian conscience that was stung by the fact that there was no longer justice in Germany, and Christian loyalty that had the courage to denounce it. There could hardly be a better illustration of what is meant by a true natural order informed and vitalised by a dynamic Christian faith.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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NOVEMBER 19TH 1941

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If the right steps are to be taken in regard to Christian education, and if the five points recently put forward by the Archbishops with the support of leaders of the Free Churches are to find acceptance, or even to be rightly understood, it seems clear that the area of discussion must be widened. There is at present a confusion of thought which hinders progress. A good deal of needless controversy might be avoided by making certain important initial distinctions. The question of Christian education is commonly discussed as though the object to be achieved were single. In actual fact, there are at least three clearly distinguishable ends to be sought. The separate tasks are, of course, related, but to be rightly related they must first be seen to be distinct.

I. THE ESSENTIAL CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

It will help towards a new perspective if we begin with the task which least often receives consideration, or even mention, in the discussion of Christian education. It is the task of making sure, so far as we can, that there will be a place in the future for a society in which Christian education can have a real meaning. The advantage of this beginning is that, instead of seeming to be concerned primarily with what the Churches can get for themselves, we establish common ground with all who care about the fate of our society.

There can be no fruitful discussion of Christian education until we have made up our minds whether we expect life to go on in the old grooves, or whether this country has to make a fundamental choice regarding the way of life it intends to pursue. This paper assumes that such a choice is inescapable.

It was possible for a long time to evade the question. In the liberal era it was taken for granted that toleration was the same thing as neutrality, and that all views had an equal claim to a hearing. This attitude was possible, because behind the apparent freedom of thought there existed a fundamental conformity. There was a general body of unquestioned values, standards and ways of behaviour, that were transmitted, consciously and unconsciously, by the home, the Church, the school and society.

Two factors have brought about a radical change. The first is that the tacit assumptions of the past are no longer accepted without question ; there is a widespread scepticism in all classes regarding traditional values and standards. The second is that the whole way of life characteristic of our society in the past is violently challenged to-day by rival social systems. There is no means of meeting and overcoming these dangers, except by opposing to them a positive social purpose. When the basis of society is threatened, it is not possible to treat all views as having equal rights. A decision becomes necessary. Society is forced to make clear to itself its purpose and aims. It must consciously choose the values by which its life will be governed ; and it must deliberately set itself to instil in the rising generation belief in these values and to encourage conduct that accords with them.

A liberal society will, of course, seek to achieve this by methods of persuasion and education which respect human freedom, and not by forms of psychological pressure which treat persons as things. But it can continue to exist as a free society only by making clear to itself the values on which it desires to build its life, and by using every means at its disposal to promote loyalty to these values. Education needs a unifying conception to direct it ; without an integrating purpose it cannot achieve its ends.

isation. A still more important reason is that, in the words of the Spens Report on Secondary Education, "no boy or girl can be counted as properly educated unless he or she has been made aware of the existence of a religious interpretation of life." The traditional form of that interpretation in this country is Christian, and consequently an understanding of the significance of religion can best be imparted through the Bible, which is the classic source of Christian inspiration and motive. The moral law of human societies, to which, as we have seen, they must either conform or perish, can be brought within the comprehension of children far more effectively through the stories and history contained in the Bible, and in particular in the Old Testament, than by any code of abstract ethical principles.

It is a difficulty that such religious instruction raises issues about the meaning of human life and destiny which in the world outside the school are the subject of profound disagreement. The solution which the Spens Report proposes is that the approach to the study of Scripture should be historical and objective, and that the temper and method of of the teaching should be such that the teachers' primary purpose will have been attained when the pupil has been helped to understand the meaning of the book that is being studied.

This approach to religious instruction does not, of course, offer a complete or easy solution. The line between a historical, objective presentation of facts and ideas and the question of their truth and of their claim to faith and obedience is not easy to draw. But there is a sound theoretical difference between the two attitudes, and the observance of the distinction lessens the practical difficulties, especially as regards the consciences of teachers.

It may reasonably be claimed that the teachers of religious knowledge, as of other subjects, should have a competent knowledge and sympathetic understanding of what they are teaching. In applying this in practice, it needs to be borne in mind, first, that the subject in question is not literature or history, but the understanding of the religious meaning of life ; and, secondly, that the clue to religious understanding is personal faith, even though it may be possible for a teacher possessing imagination and skill to convey something of the meaning of beliefs which he does not share.

It would be a grave mistake to underestimate the value of a disinterested, objective teaching of Christian facts and ideas, because it falls short of the full meaning of a Christian education. If the schools were to fulfil this task, and do it well, they would be rendering an inestimable service both to the nation and to the Christian cause—to the nation, because it would keep alive in each succeeding generation a knowledge of what has been best and most creative in its spiritual tradition ; to the Christian cause, because the Church could presuppose in its preaching and teaching a general acquaintance with the outlines of the Christian story.

It may, however, be a condition of attaining the highly important objective of a general knowledge of the Bible and Christianity that we should distinguish it clearly from other objectives which in the Christian view are essential to a full Christian education. A demand for which a strong case can be made on educational grounds must not be confused with other demands which have a less obvious relation to the proper and distinctive tasks of the school or which important sections of the community are not at present prepared to grant.

III. THE CHRISTIAN DECISION

A greater mistake could hardly be made about Christianity than to regard it as solely, or primarily, a matter of knowledge. It is the revelation of truths of the most tremendous consequence about God and man, which do not concern the intellect alone, but make demands on the feelings and will and call for a radical decision of the whole man. This fundamental choice is not only the heart of religion, but also has significance for the secular statesman or educator, since it is only through individuals who discover a new meaning in life and embark on an original adventure that new impulses can enter into and regenerate the life of society.

It is necessary at this point, however, to distinguish between the functions of the Church and those proper to the school. To present the Gospel as a call to faith and obedience is the distinctive function and responsibility of the Church. It cannot be assumed that it is the business of the national education system, which aims at equipping future citizens to fulfil their functions in a temporal society, any more than of the government or of organisations of social welfare, to carry out the functions of the Church. The pri-

mary concern of the Church is with the ultimate choices of life, and there is, indeed, no greater danger than that this function of the Church should be usurped by the state or the community or the educational authorities. This leads directly to totalitarianism. The distinction and mutual independence of Church and State is the bedrock of liberty.

There is, of course, a difficult border-land—particularly in the sphere of education, which is concerned with the unity of the growing person. It is impossible for the school to be entirely neutral in religious matters. To treat religion as having so little importance that it can be ignored is not to be neutral ; it is a positive decision against religion. In the teaching of all subjects there is implied a view of what is ultimately significant in life, and this may at any time come to the surface. That means that a complete education is possible only in the schools of a society in which there is general agreement about fundamental values.

In a mixed society, such as ours, there is no complete escape from the limitations imposed by the wide divergence of views on ultimate questions. This is not the place to enter on a discussion of the many problems connected with the dual system of schools. In principle there is much to be said for the provision or permission within the national system of opportunities for minorities to realise educational purposes which are not as yet shared by the nation as a whole.

But in regard to the large majority of schools which have not this character it is necessary to find common ground. That is why it has been urged that the unifying principle of national education must be sought not in a complete Christian interpretation of life but in an agreement about the fundamental values of man's natural life and of a healthy social order. The personal integrity of the teacher has to be safeguarded in all cases. He must not be asked to suppress his honest convictions ; but equally he must refrain from using the office with which the community has entrusted him as an opportunity of inculcating his personal beliefs. The line between these is not easy to draw, but the distinction is real and important, and everything hinges on an honest effort to observe it. The only alternative to such self-restraint is a bitter struggle between rival and political parties for possession of the schools as a means of indoctrinating the pupils with their own tenets. The disastrous consequences of such a conflict have already been emphasised.

The fear that the schools of the community may be used to impose the beliefs of a minority or to establish any kind of religious or social domination must first be removed. Only then is it possible to secure recognition for the fact that, while the functions of the school and of the Church are different, the Church (in the sense of the fellowship of believing Christians), in so far as it is alive, lives in the school as in every other sphere of human life. Where there are Christian teachers they cannot help confessing their faith and sharing it with others. The distinction between what is improper in a public educational system and what is permissible may perhaps be expressed in this way. A teacher may not say, " This is the only true faith ; unless you believe it you will be everlastingly damned." Exception ought not to be taken to his saying, " What I am teaching you I myself believe ; I have proved it and found it good." To bear such witness to their faith in word and act is an obligation resting on Christian teachers, as on Christians in all spheres of life. They do not cease to be Christian believers while they carry on their professional activities.

That they should freely exercise this personal influence will be desired, not only by Christians, but by the much wider body of those who are alive to the gravity of the spiritual crisis and recognise that a force more dynamic than mere ethical teaching is needed to meet it. If the regenerating power of Christian belief is required to evoke and sustain the human qualities that are requisite for the health of society, there is no sphere in which it is more important that this vitalising leaven should be at work than in the education of the young.

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The Basis of a Common Social Purpose

It is here that the fundamental choice has to be made. What conception of life is to be the foundation of our future national existence and the unifying principle of our national education? Some will answer without hesitation : a Christian philosophy of life and society. But it is by no means clear that this is the right answer, or the one that is relevant to the conditions of our time.

Opinions differ how far the nation can still be called Christian. It can hardly be doubted that convinced and practising Christians are only a small minority. On the other hand, there are considerable and important sections of the population which consciously and deliberately reject Christianity. We have to adjust our thinking to the fact that the country is much more pagan than we have been accustomed to suppose.

In these circumstances an attempt to capture the schools for the systematic inculcation of a Christian view of life might have unlooked for and undesirable consequences. At the worst it might precipitate an embittered conflict between rival religious and political parties for the possession of the schools, which is the straight road to totalitarianism. Christians must think, not twice merely, but many times, before committing themselves to a course of action which might have such disastrous consequences.

But the question is not merely one of expediency but of principle. To claim that the common political and social faith of the nation should be explicitly Christian is to run the risk of compromising and emasculating Christianity. Christian demands are demands made on Christians ; they can have little meaning for those who do not accept the Christian revelation. When the distinction between the sphere of the Church and that of the state and society is blurred, the danger at once arises that the meaning of Christianity may be levelled down to what the generality of men in their present spiritual condition are able to understand and willing to accept. The salt in that case loses its savour. Christianity becomes identified, as it is in the minds of many people to-day, with the natural virtues. Without the natural virtues no society can hold together, but they are not the monopoly of Christians. The values of truth and justice were known and prized before the Christian era, are inculcated by other religions than Christianity and are cherished by many who are attached to no religious organisation. The heart is taken out of the Gospel if it is regarded as merely the re-affirmation of natural goodness.

The mention of Christianity in connection with the fundamental choice which confronts the nation is not, however, wholly wide of the mark. What is needed is more precise definition. The two fundamental assertions of Christianity are that God created the world and man and that He sent Christ to redeem them. The Church has to maintain both truths, without confusing them, or merging them, or emphasising one at the expense of the other. There is a truth, that is to say, about man as man, as well as about man as sinner and as Christian.

It is the denial of this truth about man by totalitarian systems that constitutes the crisis of our time. The fight to-day is for the status and dignity of man, for the freedom of the human person, for the possibility of human community. What has to be preserved and re-established in face of deadly assault is the substance of man's humanity—the values of personal, social and political freedom, of social obligation and responsibility, of neighbourliness and fellowship. These are not values peculiar to Christianity, but they are the presuppositions of a society in which the Christian message can have significance.

The world to-day needs the Christian Gospel of redemption ; but it also needs to learn afresh what it has largely forgotten—that there is a true natural order. Freedom does not mean that man can run the world just as he likes. There is a law of his being to which he must conform or else destroy himself. This idea of a law of nature, above and more universal than positive laws, has through Stoic and Christian influence played a large part in the history of western civilisation. It exerted an enormous influence in giving Europe a civilisation with a single moral standard behind its laws. It is this great heritage that we need to-day to recover. What we have to oppose to the totalitarian denial of man's dignity and freedom is this true natural order in which man can live a genuinely human life.

To assert this truth about man as man is the definite obligation of Christians and an essential part of the witness of the Church. But in this region—in something corresponding to what was familiar to thinkers of earlier generations as Natural Law—there is common ground for co-operation in the ordering of social and political life with those who are

not Christians. Christians and non-Christians can travel at least part of the way together.

It is not difficult to point to some elements that belong to a society that accords with the truth of man's nature, such as the sacredness of personality, respect for the family, justice, humanity, and freedom of thought and speech. But these general phrases do not carry us very far. It is obviously not possible to do more in this paper than indicate the direction in which we must look. But to avoid misunderstanding, it must be said at once that what is proposed is not the formulation of a few, simple ethical propositions which can be taught in our schools by common consent. The whole history of the conception of Natural Law is a warning of the futility of such an attempt. What is meant is that the nation should make conscious to itself the values by which its life is to be guided. These will find embodiment not in abstract principles, which are sterile, but in a vital energy pervading the whole life of the community. This fundamental attitude must, of course, be informed and fortified by thought, but the intellectual interpretations will be many and various. What is essential is that the choice should be so definite and clear that certain ideas and certain forms of conduct are at once recognised to be incompatible with it.

The Indispensable Christian Leaven

But to stop at this point would be to leave the answer dangerously incomplete. If we reject the view that the integrating principle of our political and social life is to be found in the full Christian faith, which the nation as a whole has not yet accepted, it is no less certain that it cannot be found in some form of natural religion or re-affirmation of the moral law alone. It is just these that have been found wanting. It is against the democratic and liberal tradition that the continent of Europe has revolted, and even among ourselves the watch-words of this tradition have lost the power to kindle a fire in the minds of youth. Ethical ideas by themselves are too cold and bloodless to compete with the demonic energies evoked by the Nazi and Communist faiths. They need to be underpinned by dogma, which is a conviction about what is ultimately real, and to be clothed with the flesh and blood of living history before they can arouse and capture the emotions.

When we say, therefore, that the alternative to a totalitarian society is a society embodying the principles of a true natural order, what is meant is not such an order existing in its own right and having its whole meaning in itself, but one that is penetrated, vitalised and continually challenged by a dynamic Christian faith. The natural order can maintain itself only if it is perpetually revivified and renewed by streams from a deeper source. For a Christian it is only the Gospel that can put Natural Law back on to the map.

To hold that it is an essential part of the Christian witness to vindicate the truth about man's original nature is not to abate one iota of the Christian certainty that man in his natural state, with all his natural virtues, needs to be saved ; and that it is through the salvation brought by Christ that he can be restored to his true nature and enabled to fulfil the law of his being. But unless his original nature, as personal and social, as free and responsible, is preserved, he can no longer hear the Word of forgiveness, mercy and hope which is addressed to him as a human person.

We may seem to have strayed from the subject of Christian education to the larger question of society. But the problem of education is always in the last resort the problem of society. Any treatment of education is superficial which ignores the fact that what is taught has meaning only in relation to the experience of the pupils. If it has no bearing on the life which they know, it must seem to relate to a vanished or an imaginary world. All effective instruction is, as Tolstoi said, a commentary on experience. A large part of the experience on which teaching in the school is a commentary is gained outside the school. Christian education can have real meaning only in a society in which Christian thought and teaching are not wholly alien and in which the practice of the Christian way of life does not encounter insurmountable obstacles.

II. CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE

The second task which has to be undertaken, if this country is to have a Christian education, is the impartation of religious knowledge. There are good educational grounds for the inclusion of the teaching of the Christian Scriptures in the school curriculum. The Bible contains great literature and illuminates in vital and important ways the origins and nature of our own civil-